Child Rearing Inc: On the Perils of Political Paralysis Down Under

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Abstract
In his 2007 PESA keynote address, Paul Smeyers discussed the increasing regulation of child-rearing through government intervention and the generation of "experts," citing particular examples from Europe where cases of childhood obesity and parental neglect have stirred public opinion and political debate. In his paper (this issue), Smeyers touches on a number of tensions before concluding that child rearing qualifies as a practice in which liberal governments should be reluctant to intervene. In response, I draw on recent experiences in Australia and argue that certain tragic events of late are the result of an ethical, moral and social vacuum in which these tensions coalesce. While I agree with Smeyers that governments should be reluctant to "intervene" in the private domain of the family, I argue that there is a difference between intervention and support. In concluding, I maintain that if certain Western liberal democracies did a more comprehensive job of supporting children and their families through active social investment in primary school education, then both families and schools would be better equipped to deal with the challenges they now face.

Introduction
It goes almost without saying that the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed fundamental change to the institution of the family. Whilst the emergence of feminism has received the majority of the blame, neoliberal individualism - bolstered by the discourse of expertism - quietly festers at the root of the wound. In certain western industrialised nations, we see a number of inter-related, mutually confounding phenomena - globalisation, competition and the changing world of work; ageing populations, declining birth rates, increased dependency on female economic labour and use of childcare; escalating diagnosis of behavioural and emotional disorders in children, and the prescription of psychoactive drugs to their growing ranks. While it is recognised in some pockets of the world that it "takes a village to raise a child", in some Western cultures we have become divorced from the social and inter-relational quality of child-rearing. In Australia, a recent series of events point to deep flaws in our approach to the nurture of children and function as a society. While traumatic events involving child abuse and neglect have occurred throughout history, a litany of tragedies over the last year prompts urgent questions as to the role of government and the effectiveness of current social policy. One of those questions should be: *Does liberty really mean 'fend for oneself'?*

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At Liberty

In October 2007, the body of a two year old boy was found stuffed into a suitcase floating in a pond in south-western Sydney (Kennedy & Moore, 2007). His mother, against whom the Department of Community Services had already issued a court order for criminal neglect, was arrested for his murder. Less than two weeks later, a seven year old girl with autism was found dead in her bed on the mid north-coast of New South Wales (Kontominas & Clennell, 2007). She had never been to school, was kept isolated and eventually died of starvation – weighing just nine kilos. Both children and their families were known to the NSW Department of Community Services but despite numerous complaints by neighbours and former foster carers these two children fell through the cavernous gaps which now exist in social services. In the weeks following their deaths, debate raged over the failure of the child protection system but inevitably, the hue and cry died down and the media resumed its love affair with the rising cost of petrol.

Recently however, another spate of tragic events has highlighted the danger in which some children live their daily lives. In June 2008, 18 month old twins in Queensland were found dead in their cot by their 11 year old sister who went to investigate a strange smell (ABC, 2008). The twins, weighing four kilos each, had died of starvation nine days earlier. On the other side of the country, family services in South Australia were forced to remove five children from an over-crowded housing commission property, after one child was hospitalised with severe hypothermia (James & Owen, 2008). Subsequent investigation by State authorities revealed that a 28 year old pregnant mother of seven was living in squalor with a mid-30s mother of 12 who was also pregnant (with twins). While neighbours maintained that many complaints had been made to Family Services, South Australian authorities only admitted knowledge of the larger family, claiming ignorance of the other because they had moved from the neighbouring state of Victoria. Despite the squalid conditions and ensuing community outrage, the majority of children were allowed to remain in the home – even though the RSPCA removed two emaciated dogs.

That same week in June, four children were removed from a home in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) after police responded to a breach of a protection order by their 35-year-old mother. According to media reports, child protection authorities had abandoned proceedings in the ACT Children's Court to gain custody of the children in 2005, consenting instead to a two-year court order that allowed the woman to keep the children with supervision from the department. When the supervision order lapsed, child protection staff continued to visit the home through voluntary arrangements but 'found no reason to remove the children' (Violante, 2008). This decision was made just four days before the police reported to the ACT Magistrates Court that they had found the children completely alone with:

> …rubbish in every room and no edible food or clean clothes… knives concealed in children's clothing, two of the family's dogs had urinated and defecated throughout the house, rotting food, furniture and rubbish blocked the rear entrance, and two of the bedrooms were so cluttered with rubbish and dirty clothes the doors could not be opened more than 30cm. (Violante, 2008)

In each of these circumstances, respective state departments responsible for family and community services were heavily criticised. The Federal government has since called for national co-ordination in child protection to prevent itinerant families skipping the border to avoid detection. Australia's new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stated that child protection authorities around the nation need to work together and urged the community to report child neglect. However, state department child protection personnel responded that the number of reports of at-risk children have risen markedly in recent years and in New South Wales alone, 'almost 13,000 children have been deemed unable to live in their family home' (WST, 2008), leaving overloaded staff unable to respond to all but the most critical cases. Many children remain in highly dysfunctional situations because of system overload but, at some point, authorities need to question why the system is said to be in danger of collapsing under its own weight (TAS, 2008).

Horrific though they are and however incomprehensible, responsibility for these events and the actions leading to them is not restricted to the hapless, aberrant biological "parents". Events such as these take shape and crystallise in the vacuum created by liberalism's reluctance to provide a basic road map for how one should seek to live one's life. As the West moves away from religion and other grand narratives (Law, 2006) towards neoliberal individualism and the entrepreneurial self (Olssen, 2004; Peters & Besley, 2006), this vacuum is being filled by a voracious industry of "experts" who feed off parental and social anxiety (Rose, 1987, 1990). A perfect storm now exists where this anxiety becomes perpetually reinforced, disempowering and disabling those involved in the care and education of children (Graham & Armstrong, 2008). The constant dissection of parenting practice by experts has resulted in a multitude of theories about child-rearing, such that there is no "right" way to parent but "professional" guidance is expensive to obtain. In the resulting void where everything is viewed as less-than-perfect, it has become increasingly difficult to define and identify when parents *really are* getting it wrong, and what constitutes unacceptable as opposed to imperfect practice. In many areas of social life, but particularly in relation to child-protection, we see the effects of this when governments equivocate as to whether it is legitimate for them to act, what that action might look like and when it should start.

While schools, teachers and an enthusiastic media decry "slack" or "neglectful" parenting (and, paradoxically, the opposite - "hyper" or "helicopter" parenting), seldom do any of these stakeholders acknowledge the brave new world that many parents face. This is ironic given that education has itself been caught in the same vice. In educational jurisdictions around the world, the educational project has been hi-jacked by the relentless pursuit of economic competition and international competitive advantage. Australia is no exception to this trend with the new Federal government clearly hitching education to the economy both in terms of bureaucratic discourse and organisation. The purpose of education is no longer clear-cut (if it ever truly was) and in the midst of competing ideas of what education should be, what form it should take and who it should serve, schools struggle to be all things to all people. Educational practice has been caught "on the hop", so to speak, as child-centred approaches struggle to reconcile competing and contradictory demands. These demands are dominated by external steering mechanisms (created by standardised testing and accountability measures which dictate how much time is spent on "core"

curricula, reducing time for pastoral care), and the rapidly changing nature of society, which now requires schools to shoulder more of the burden involved in child-rearing. The 'heavy lifting' (Bonnor & Caro, 2007) in this area is reserved for government schools as policies of school markets and parent choice have resulted in 'white flight' and middle class evacuation to an independent sector heavily subsidised during the decade of the Howard Federal government (Graham, 2007a).

Government schools now complain of an increase in pastoral responsibilities and educational stakeholders have called for a new charter to outline what should be the 'core business' of schools (Angus, Olney, & Ainley, 2007). Certain educational ministers, keen to pass the buck, blame parents for failing to educate their children "socially and emotionally" (Welford, 2008) but seldom are the shifting cultural and economic realities of modern life acknowledged for their tremendous influence; the problems they cause are too big, too hard, and too expensive to fix. In such a climate, parents become convenient political footballs and governments continue to avoid confronting the factors through which social disadvantage becomes entrenched: early school leaving, low job skills, low family income, disability/sickness, low computer skills, long term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment (Vinson, 2007). The school can play a critical role as a catalyst for change in disadvantaged people's lives, however, in Australia they are not adequately supported by government departments in other fields of social policy, as:

> the retreat from active social investment in the form of a social wage (for example, universal health care, quality childcare and preschool, and supportive labour market programs) means that education, as a public good, is left to do its work relatively unsupported – uninsulated by complementary 'active' redistribution measures. (Graham, 2007b, p. 542)

In recent interviews with primary school principals (Graham & Spandagou, forthcoming), it became apparent that schools in disadvantaged areas act as proxy family support services in the absence of comprehensive government action. Unlike schools in the UK and US, most Australian schools do not provide subsidised lunch services for disadvantaged children – although some principals at the frontline have been forced to engage with charities to supply breakfast programs. One principal at a metropolitan school in a depressed region of Sydney reported classroom teachers buying lunch for children whose parents had 'spent the dole cheque' on cigarettes, drugs and alcohol. He described how these children lacked sleep as well as basic nutrition because 'Dad beats up Mum every other night' or drugs and weak discipline saw children watching television instead of sleeping.

Elsewhere "Tom", a principal at a regional country school, discussed how welfare-dependency reached beyond department boundaries into the school. To provide an example of parental dependence on the school as a proxy support system, Tom described how a mother had dropped her children at school on Wednesday telling the teacher that 'she had given them canned spaghetti for breakfast but because she had only 20 bucks to make it to Friday and needed it for petrol, the children would have to survive without food until then'. The school was then obliged to step in by providing food for these children by

"borrowing" from global funding sources 'meant to provide for the education of all the children in the school'. Tom then acknowledged that this mother 'at least tries' before describing his own recent experiences with an abusive mother of eight whose children constantly arrived at school hungry, dirty and unfit to learn. Tom told of how he continually put himself in harm's way to draw the mother into the school, so that he could try and engage her in the care of her children.

> This woman is very violent and aggressive and won't ever answer the phone but you can get her attention by confiscating something off one of the children and she'll come in because she'll wanna have a fight.

Although he was very matter of fact about such experiences, Tom expressed significant frustration with the lack of support from social services:

> These children are under the care of the Minister, so they don't actually belong to her anymore – but they're not fed, not cared for… frequently with boils… the sort of thing you would see in a third world country. We report to DOCS – we notify – we follow up and say "Well, what's going on with these kids?" and they say "Well, you know… they were in foster care but it wasn't that good so we're not about to take them away." In my opinion, these children should NOT be with that parent. They're being abused… aahh… but, that's it! There's more urgent and serious and more pressing cases, so you know they start off with infants like with… Aahh um… a very young baby they will take. But they don't have enough to do any more.

The tension between teaching and learning and social welfare was a constant theme in discussion with principals of schools in challenging communities. Speaking of the effects introduced by economic rationalism in social service policy, "Tom" described the bureaucracy's enthusiasm for "productivity dividends" where budgets must decrease by 1% every year. He wryly pointed out that this was unsustainable but also described how it affected the school in that any initiatives or innovative programs the school came up with – no matter how good or effective they were – must be "cost-neutral" in order to be accepted by the Department of Education. Therefore, a breakfast program or a school welfare officer comes at the *cost* of something else. This theme was reiterated in an interview with a principal from the outskirts of Sydney, who described how his school had to deal with the social issues before they could even think about getting traction in teaching and learning because the challenges in this region were so great. Although he accepted this as a necessary challenge, "Allan" worried aloud that if his school was removed from the Priority Schools Funding program they would immediately lose their Welfare Officer and some extra support teachers whom he had deliberately brought on to support teaching and learning.

Speaking of the government support of primary schools, "Tom" reflected on his prior experience as a high school teacher to explain primary schooling's "poor cousin" relationship to secondary education:

> They're funded on shoe size. Like there's more money goes into secondary education. Right? And its seen as much more important – ooo… HSC… big deal… it's in the front page of all the papers so everything's gotta be right about the HSC. Down here? Board of Studies, you never see them. You could do almost anything and get away with it in a primary situation in terms of what you're teaching. Board of Studies never looks at it! There's no sort of checks and balances like that in primary… not that we don't do a good job and we're still subject to… um… external testing and those results are held over our heads and we're still beaten up with them but there's not the media and political pressure to do better and do better and resource the schools? In a primary school if there's a problem … like, well, it's not politically interesting and so it's um… really poorly resourced relative to secondary.

In response to the situation faced by many primary schools, the Australian Primary Principals Association recently called for a new charter for primary schools by releasing a research report outlining current challenges (Angus et al., 2007). Numerous issues were cited as contributing to the problems these schools are said to face: crowded curriculums; inconsistent, inequitable and insufficient funding; challenges serving an increasingly diverse school population; increased demand for pastoral care; teacher and principal burnout; and the drive towards higher standards and measurement of performance. While the report makes many valid points, the accompanying APPA media campaign was somewhat backward-looking. Parents were subtly criticised during the campaign and the demand for a new charter appeared to be more intent on a reduction of responsibility, rather than a holistic evaluation of what primary schools need to be able to do in a dynamic post-modern society characterised by discontinuity and rapid change.

The reality is that the genie is not about to return to the 1950s golden-age[1]. Families are under pressure at both ends – whether engaged as individual economic agents or not – and the rhetoric in phrases such as "joined up government" is beginning to show plainly in countries like Australia. Families, schools and social services are operating as single entities in a brave new world where impenetrable social armour is needed. As recent events show, the question over as to whether governments should intervene comes too late for many. While respect for an individual's right for self-determination is proper in liberal democracies, self-determination can still occur within a context buffered by reciprocal responsibility for quality of life and should never be reduced to 'fend for oneself'. If parents in Australia were adequately supported with access to paid maternity leave, quality medical and dental care, universal childcare, free museums, parks and community activities, as well as services in schools including school lunches, and quality after-school care where children receive something to eat as well as help with homework, then the individual burden on families and schools and demand for 'experts' would not be quite so great.

[1] This is typically cast as an era when mothers stayed home, baked and patiently helped their children with homework, while fathers kicked a football with their son when they returned from work before dark.

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